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ABSTRACT

A major argument made in favor of age-segregated services is that older people prefer and benefit from age-homogeneous social interaction. This preference was assessed through a secondary analysis of the national data from "The Myth and Reality of Aging" survey (Harris, 1975). All respondents 18 years of age or older (N=4065) were asked whether they would prefer to spend the majority of their time with people of the same age or with people of different ages. A majority of persons under 65 (66.8%) and over 65 (74.3%) expressed a preference for interaction with people of different ages. Among those 65 or older (N=2700), a preference for interaction limited to people of the same age was expressed by significantly higher proportions of males, ethnic minorities, the poor, retirees, the less educated, those with role loss or need problems, and those with older age identifications. However, a majority of these subgroups preferred interaction with people of all ages. No difference was found between younger older adults and the oldest older adults. Senior center members expressed an even higher preference than did nonmembers for interaction with people of all ages. Results suggest that age-segregated service providers should consider cross-generational interaction in program planning. (Author)

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PREFERENCE FOR AGE-HOMOGENEOUS VERSUS AGE-HETEROGENEOUS SOCIAL INTERACTION

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Abstract

A major argument made in favor of age-segregated services is that older people prefer and benefit from age-homogeneous social interaction. While studies indicate that older people who are attracted to age-segregated services benefit from them, no evidence of a widespread preference for age-homogeneous social interaction was found. A review of the theoretical and empirical literature did, however, suggest that a preference for age-homogeneity might be more characteristic of those considered target groups for social services, such as the old-old, frail, isolated, poor, and minorities.

The present study sought to assess this preference through secondary analysis of the national data from The Myth and Reality of Aging survey (Harris, 1975). All respondents 18 years of age or older were asked "Would you personally prefer to spend most of your time with people about your own age or with people of all different ages?" Two-thirds of persons under 65 and three-quarters of those 65 or over expressed a preference for interaction with people of all different ages. Among those 65 or over a preference for interaction limited to people one's own age was expressed by significantly higher proportions of males, ethnic minorities, poor, retirees, less educated, those experiencing problems indicative of role loss and need, and those with older age identifications. However, even among these subgroups, a majority still preferred interaction with people of all ages. No difference was found between the young-old and the old-old. Surprisingly, senior center members expressed an even higher preference for interaction with people of all ages than did non-members.

It is recommended that the high level of interest expressed by both young and old in interacting with people of all ages is promising and should, therefore, be further explored. Optimal conditions conducive to such interaction need to be identified. It is also recommended that age-segregated service providers consider opportunities for cross-generational interaction in the design and planning of these programs. Finally, while age-segregated services are a desirable option for some older persons, they should not be relied upon exclusively to connect those in need with appropriate services. Multiple entry points into the service network should be encouraged.

Introduction

The appropriateness of age-segregated versus age-integrated services has been the subject of considerable controversy. Arguments and evidence supporting each position have been compiled by Tobin, Davidson, and Sack (1976). The major argument presented for age-segregated services is based on older persons' preference for and benefit from age-homogeneous interactions. Yet, supporting evidence is only provided for the second part of the argument concerning client benefits. Studies have indeed shown that age-segregated residences and services facilitate friendship formation and group identification (Rosow, 1967), sense of purposefulness (Hochschild, 1973), socialization for impending death (Marshall, 1974) and assumption of leadership roles (Kleemer, 1961). However, it is interesting to note that Tobin et al do not cite any studies supporting older persons' preference for age-homogeneous peer interaction.

From a theoretical perspective, the assertion that older persons prefer limiting social interaction to each other is subject to question. Dissociation theory posits that the social forces which promote identification with other older persons are weak. At the same time, the pressures which foster denial and dissociation from other older persons are pervasive and strong. These include middle-age role loss and status devaluation. These pressures are further intensified by the absence of any clear or valued roles and statuses associated with old age. This position, whose major proponent has been Rosow (1974), would predict widespread aversion to age-segregated social interaction and services.

Integration theory, which is consistent with Rose's (1965) subculture of aging conceptualization, acknowledges the aforementioned lossess and societal rejection of old age. However, rather than a response of dissociation, this theory posits that older people faced with age losses and societal rejection become more favorably disposed toward one another. Furthermore, older people will tend to identify with other older people as a means of mutual support. This position would, therefore, predict greater preference for age-homogeneous social interaction, particularly among those experiencing problems in adjusting to old age.

It should be noted that both Rosow and Rose assume that younger members of society devalue the elderly and are reluctant to interact with older persons. Furthermore, both theorists would acknowledge that the desire to associate exclusively with aged peers does not characterize the majority of older persons. Rose, however, sees this becoming more likely in the future as a subculture of aging develops while Rosow considers it highly unlikely that such a subculture will emerge.

An examination of the empirical literature indicates that older persons' preference with respect to the age of their social associates has not been the subject of extensive investigation. Studies of late-life friendships (reviewed by Hess, 1972; Riley & Foner, 1969) do find that age-homophily, or similarity with respect to age, is a salient basis for friendship formation. At all ages, friendships are found to occur most often among age peers. Undoubtedly, having shared similar life stages, historical experiences, and cohort values provides a strong basis for friendship formation. However, these studies do not support the assertion of preference for exclusive interaction with age peers. In fact, these

studies also show that older people do have at least one younger person they consider to be a friend. Whether the number of younger friends would have been greater if not for limited opportunities and societal barriers to such friendships is unanswered from the available data.

Studies of age-segregated housing also fail to provide support for a widespread preference for such living arrangements (see review by Carp, 1976). By and large, these studies show that older persons who choose to live in such housing derive various benefits and satisfactions. Whether these positive outcomes are due to the age-segregated nature of the housing or the self-selection and selective recruitment of the residents is open to some question (Longino, McClelland, Peterson, 1980). However, looking at studies that have examined preference, the findings have consistently indicated that majorities of older people who are not already living in age-segregated housing are not attracted to such living arrangements, (Gottesman, 1970; Havighurst, 1969; Ingraham, 1974; Longino, McClelland, & Peterson, 1980; Winiecke, 1973). Preference for age-segregated housing is, however, greater among elderly from lower socio-economic backgrounds, particularly if their health is failing or if they have lost work and family roles (Rosow, 1967).

Studies of age identification, or self-perception in terms of age, also raise questions about the likelihood of a widespread preference for age-homogeneous social interaction. One of the consistent findings in this area has been that majorities of older people deny their advancing age and persist in defining themselves as young or middle-aged well into their 70's. (see review by Daum, 1978; Peters, 1971)

It is, therefore, unlikely that persons who deny their aging and do not perceive themselves as being "old" will prefer limiting their social interaction to people their own age. However, as with preference for age-segregated housing, some studies have found self-identification as old to be higher among those with lower incomes and socio-economic backgrounds, those in poorer health, among widows and retirees, and also among minority elderly, (Atchely & George, 1973; Blau, 1973; Busse, Jeffers, & Obrist, 1970; Bultena & Powers, 1978; George, 1975; Kutner, Fanshel, & Togo, 1956; Linn & Hirsch, 1977; Mutran & Burke, 1976; Suchman, Phillips, & Streib, 1958).

Research Questions

The theoretical and empirical literature examined raise questions about using older persons' preference for age-homogeneous interaction as the basis for policy and program formulation. At the same time, the available findings indicate that this preference may be more pronounced among those elderly usually considered target groups for social services such as the old-old, poor, isolated, frail, and minorities. This would suggest that age-segregation is a valid basis for programatic intervention since it may reflect the preferences of those in greatest need of services. However, more direct evidence than is presently available is needed. The present study was therefore, undertaken in order to answer the following research questions:

1) Does preferred age of associates differ for people under and over 65 years of age?

2) Among the elderly, is preferred age of associates related to socio-demographic and subjective indicators of role loss and need?

3) Among the elderly, is preferred age of associates related to age identification?

4) Among the elderly, is preferred age of associates related to interest in and use of age-segregated services?

The first research question will be examined for a national sample of adults aged 18 and over. The other research questions will only be examined for those aged 65 or over.

Methodology

Subjects

The data for this study were obtained through secondary analysis of the findings of the Myth and Reality of Aging in America study (Harris, 1975). This national household survey used a multi-stage random cluster sampling technique to generate national samples of 1457 persons aged 18 to 64 and 2797 persons 65 years of age or over. An examination of the representativeness of the sample found it to be comparable with available census data, except for a slight underrepresentation of those 80 and over and those with very limited education (Henretta, Campbell, & Gardocki, 1977). Being a household survey, the sample did not include institutionalized elderly. Detailed information regarding the sampling methodology will be found in the published report of the study.

Measures

Preferred Age of Associates: All respondents were asked "Would you personally prefer to spend most of your time with people about your own age or with people of all different ages?" Analysis is based on the 95.6% of the total sample who expressed a preference (1365 out of 1457 persons under 65 and 2700 out of 2797 persons 65 or over).

Personal Problems: Respondents were presented with a list of 12 problems and asked if each was a "very serious problem, a somewhat serious problem, or hardly a problem at all for you personally". The problems studied were; not having enough money to live on, poor health, loneliness, poor housing, not enough clothing, not enough to do to keep busy, fear of crime, not enough friends, not feeling needed, not enough education, not enough job opportunities, and not enough medical care. These items were used to assess subjective perception of need and role loss.

Age Identification: Respondents 65 or over were told "There are a number of ways that people refer to Americans over 65. I'm going to read you some of these. For each, please tell me whether you like to be referred to in this way or not? Acceptable responses were "like, don't like, or makes no difference". A preliminary factor analysis of the 10 age terms found two underlying dimensions; chronological age labels and euphemistic age labels. The three terms with the highest loadings on each factor were used in the present study. Chronological age labels studied were "aged person", "elderly person", and "old man or woman". Euphemistic age labels studied were "senior citizen", "retired person", and "mature American". By substantial majorities, older persons personally accepted euphemistic age labels and rejected chronological age labels.

Interest and Use of Age-Segregated Services: Two such services were studied, age-segregated housing and senior citizen centers. Respondents were asked "If it were completely up to you, would you prefer to live in housing with people of different ages or in housing limited to people your own age?" With respect to senior citizen centers, respondents were asked whether they had gone to one in the past year. Respondents who hadn't been to a senior citizen center, 82% of

the sample, were then asked whether they would be interested in attending such centers. The responses to the latter preference question cannot be obtained from the currently available computer tapes of the study data. Thus, unlike preference for age-segregated housing, analysis is presently limited to actual use or non-use of senior citizen centers.

Statistical Procedures

For the present study, two—dimensional cross-tabular analysis with chi-square significance tests were used. It should be noted that such analysis cannot detect any interactive and cummulative effects of the independent variables. Subsequent analysis using multi-dimensional cross-tabulations and multivariate statistical techniques are planned.

The original data were weighted to correct for the oversampling of those 65 and over compared to those under 65 and for the overrepresentation of Black elderly. For the present analysis, the unweighted data were used. Overall, this results in slight discrepancies, usually no more than two percentage points, with published weighted data.

Results

Majorities of persons aged 18 and over preferred spending most of their time with people of all different ages than just with people their own age (Table 1). Two out of three persons under 65 (66.8%) and three out of four persons over 65 (74.3%) said they preferred interacting with people of all different ages. This preference was lowest among those in their 50's (62.7%) and then increased among those 60 to 64 (68.1%). It increased even further among those 65 to 69 (76.7%). After age 70, preference for age-heterogeneous interaction leveled off slightly but still remained somewhat higher than that of most younger age groups.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Among persons 65 or over, preference for interaction with people of one's own age was significantly higher among males, minorities, those who were retired, those with less education, and among those with lower incomes. (Table 2) However, among none of the socio-demographic subgroups examined did a majority prefer limiting their interaction to people their own age. After age 65, no further significant age differences were found. Preferred age of associates did not differ significantly between married and non-married persons 65 or over.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

TABLE 1

PREFERRED AGE OF ASSOCIATES BY AGE
AMONG PERSONS 18 +
in percents (N = 4065)

AGE *	PREFERRED AGE ASSOCIATES	
	PEOPLE OF ALL AGES	PEOPLE OF SAME AGE
18 - 64	66.8	33.2
18 - 29	67.7	32.3
30 - 39	69.5	30.5
40 - 49	66.4	33.6
50 - 59	62.7	37.3
60 - 64	68.9	31.1
65 +	74.3	25.7
65 - 69	76.7	23.3
70 - 79	73.2	26.8
80 +	72.2	27.8

* $P < .001$

TABLE 2

PREFERRED AGES OF ASSOCIATES AMONG PEOPLE 65 +
BY SELECTED DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS
in percents (N = 2700)

CHARACTERISTICS		PREFERRED AGES OF ASSOCIATES	
		PEOPLE OF ALL AGES	PEOPLE OF SAME AGE
TOTAL		74.3	25.7
AGE:	65 - 69	76.7	23.3
	70 - 79	73.2	26.8
	80 +	72.2	27.8
*** SEX:	MALE	70.1	29.9
	FEMALE	77.0	23.0
*** RACE:	WHITE	77.6	22.4
	BLACK	61.4	38.6
	OTHER	58.0	42.0
MARITAL STATUS:	MARRIED	74.6	25.4
	NOT MARRIED	74.4	25.6
*EMPLOYMENT STATUS:	WORKING	79.4	20.6
	NOT WORKING	73.0	27.0
*** EDUCATION:	LESS THAN 8TH GRADE	65.7	34.3
	8TH TO 11TH GRADE	75.6	24.4
	H. S. GRADUATE	78.2	21.8
	SOME COLLEGE	82.9	17.1
*** INCOME:	UNDER 3,000	66.5	33.5
	3,000 - 4,999	73.2	26.8
	5,000 - 9,999	78.6	21.4
	10,000 +	84.6	15.4

* $P < .05$ ** $P < .01$ *** $P < .001$

Each of the 12 problems used to measure personal role loss and need was significantly related to the preferred age of associates (Table 3). Eleven were significant at the .001 level or better. In each case, experienced severity of the problem was related to decreased levels of preference for interaction with persons of all different ages. However, with but one exception, a majority of those experiencing each problem still preferred age-heterogeneous interaction. The one exception was among the poorest subgroup, those 3.3% of the elderly sample who said that "not enough clothing" was a very serious problem for them. In this group, 51.7% said they preferred interacting with people their own age.

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Preferred age of associates was unrelated to the perception of oneself as being a senior citizen, a retired person, or a mature American (Table 4). These were the most popular names among the study sample. However, those who accepted the less popular designations of elderly person, aged person, or old man or woman were more inclined to limit their interaction to people their own ages. However, even among these latter groups, the majority still favored age-heterogeneous social interaction.

INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

Preference for interaction with people of one's own age was significantly higher among those who were interested in age-segregated housing (42.9%) than for those not interested in such residential arrangements (12.1%, Table 5).

TABLE 3

PREFERRED AGES OF ASSOCIATES AMONG PEOPLE 65 +
BY PERSONAL PROBLEMS
in percents (N = 2700)

PROBLEM		PREFERRED AGES OF ASSOCIATES	
		PEOPLE OF ALL AGES	PEOPLE OF SAME AGE
TOTAL		74.3	25.7
***NOT HAVING ENOUGH MONEY TO LIVE ON:	VERY	59.3	40.7
	SOMEWHAT	74.2	25.8
	HARDLY	79.6	20.4
***POOR HEALTH:	VERY	62.0	38.0
	SOMEWHAT	74.7	25.3
	HARDLY	80.5	19.5
***LONELINESS:	VERY	61.4	38.6
	SOMEWHAT	71.5	28.5
	HARDLY	78.2	21.8
***POOR HOUSING:	VERY	55.8	44.2
	SOMEWHAT	63.2	36.8
	HARDLY	76.6	23.4
***NOT ENOUGH CLOTHING:	VERY	48.3	51.7
	SOMEWHAT	60.4	39.6
	HARDLY	76.3	23.7
***NOT ENOUGH TO DO TO KEEP BUSY:	VERY	53.8	46.2
	SOMEWHAT	68.6	31.4
	HARDLY	77.1	22.9
**FEAR OF CRIME:	VERY	69.5	30.5
	SOMEWHAT	74.1	25.9
	HARDLY	76.8	23.2
***NOT ENOUGH FRIENDS:	VERY	57.4	42.6
	SOMEWHAT	66.2	33.8
	HARDLY	76.5	23.5
***NOT FEELING NEEDED:	VERY	62.7	37.3
	SOMEWHAT	65.3	34.7
	HARDLY	77.1	22.9
***NOT ENOUGH EDUCATION:	VERY	59.0	41.0
	SOMEWHAT	68.2	31.8
	HARDLY	78.6	21.4
***NOT ENOUGH JOB OPPORTUNITIES:	VERY	60.8	39.2
	SOMEWHAT	63.6	36.4
	HARDLY	77.1	22.9
***NOT ENOUGH MEDICAL CARE:	VERY	60.0	40.0
	SOMEWHAT	71.0	29.0
	HARDLY	77.3	22.7

* $P < .05$ ** $P < .01$ *** $P < .001$

PREFERRED AGES OF ASSOCIATES AMONG PEOPLE 65 +
BY SELECTED AGE-IDENTIFICATION LABELS
in percents (N = 2700)

AGE LABEL		PREFERRED AGES OF ASSOCIATES	
		PEOPLE OF ALL AGES	PEOPLE OF SAME AGE
TOTAL		74.3	25.7
SENIOR CITIZEN:	LIKE	73.0	27.0
	NO DIFFERENCE	74.3	25.7
	DISLIKE	78.8	21.2
RETIRED PERSON:	LIKE	74.7	25.3
	NO DIFFERENCE	72.0	28.0
	DISLIKE	78.2	21.8
MATURE AMERICAN:	LIKE	73.9	26.1
	NO DIFFERENCE	72.7	27.3
	DISLIKE	79.3	20.7
***ELDERLY PERSON:	LIKE	73.1	26.9
	NO DIFFERENCE	71.0	29.0
	DISLIKE	79.3	20.7
***AGED PERSON:	LIKE	66.1	33.9
	NO DIFFERENCE	71.4	28.6
	DISLIKE	79.3	20.7
***OLD MAN/WOMAN:	LIKE	65.0	35.0
	NO DIFFERENCE	68.9	31.1
	DISLIKE	77.6	22.4

* P< .05 ** P< .01 ***P < .001

It should be pointed out that larger number of persons 65 or over expressed interest in age-segregated housing (45.0%) than for social interaction limited to people their own age (25.7%). With respect to actual use of an age-segregated service, however, an unexpected reversal was noted. Those who had gone to a senior citizen center in the previous year had a significantly higher preference for interaction with people of all ages (78.4%) than those who had not gone to a center (73.5%).

INSERT TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

TABLE 5

PREFERRED AGE OF ASSOCIATES AMONG PEOPLE 65 +
BY INTEREST AND USE OF AGE-SEGREGATED SERVICES
in percents (N = 2700)

INTEREST AND USE	PREFERRED AGE OF ASSOCIATES	
	PEOPLE OF ALL AGES	PEOPLE OF SAME AGE
*** INTERESTED IN AGE-SEGREGATED HOUSING:		
INTERESTED	57.1	42.9
NOT INTERESTED	87.9	12.1
* SENIOR CENTERS:		
HAVE GONE IN PAST YEAR	78.4	21.6
HAVEN'T GONE IN PAST YEAR	73.5	26.5

* P< .05 ** P < .01 *** P< .001

Discussion and Conclusions

Before drawing any definite conclusions, the limitations of the study's dependent variable, preferred age of associates, must be noted. Respondents may have indicated a preference for interacting with people of all different ages because they perceived this to be more socially desirable. Furthermore, the nature of the preferred interaction was not specified and may have reflected a continuum from casual contact to intimate friendship. The response "people of all different ages" did not single out the elderly and may have been interpreted as meaning people of all different younger ages. Finally, being a measure preference, the responses do not reflect actual behavior.

Despite these limitations, a number of provocative findings did emerge. One unexpected finding was the extent to which majorities of persons aged 18 to 64 indicated a preference for interacting with people of all ages. Even if social desirability inflated these expressions of preference, it is still interesting to note the ideal social value held by younger persons.

It is reasonable to assume that a sizable number of younger persons would, in fact, interact with older persons under circumstances favorable to the initiation and maintenance of cross-generational contacts. Presumably, age disparity would be less of a barrier to social interaction if those involved shared common backgrounds and interests. With older generations being increasingly better educated and the greater variability of modal behavior patterns throughout the life course (Neugarten & Hagestad, 1976) these conditions may, in fact, be emerging.

The findings further question the existence of a widespread preference for age-homogeneous interaction among the elderly themselves, even among those considered target groups for social services. Preference for age-heterogeneous interaction, was indeed, higher for minorities, retirees, the less educated, the poor, those in poor health, the isolated, and also among those considering themselves aged. However, among none of these groups did a majority prefer limiting their social contacts to people their own age.

Overall, preference for age-segregated housing was higher among persons 65 or over (45.0%) than was the preference for social interaction limited to people of one's own age (25.7%). However even among those desiring age-segregated housing, a majority still wished to interact with people of all ages. This indicates that preference for age-segregated housing does not necessarily reflect a primary desire to disengage from social interaction with younger persons.

Surprisingly, persons who went to senior centers were even less positive about age-homogeneous social interaction than were those who did not attend these centers. This finding is supported by evidence from other studies. Rose (1965), in his original work on aging group consciousness, found that members of age-segregated social groups were more interested in social interaction with people of all ages than were non-members of such groups. Taietz (1976) found no difference between senior center members and non-members in preference for joining social clubs made up of similar or different age groups. Taitz concludes, "Whatever their reasons for joining the senior center may be, solidarity with the aging and identification with them are not strong reasons." (p.221) The data, therefore, suggest that some older people will accept a

highly valued benefit like group socialization in an age-segregated setting even if this is not their initial preference. Whether sizable numbers of older persons forego needed services is not addressed by the present data.

The findings cannot be interpreted as implying that age-segregated services are not an attractive option for sizable numbers of older people. Strong arguments for age-segregated services can be made, as does Tobin (et al, 1976) on the basis that the special problems of the elderly require the expertise of age specialists and that in times of limited resources the needs of the elderly will be neglected if they have to compete with the young. Furthermore, minorities of elderly do prefer age-homogeneous interaction, especially among those considered target groups for services. However, other options must be explored for the majority of older persons.

Based on the findings of the present study, the following recommendations are made;

1) The potential interest for cross-generational interaction expressed by the young and old is promising and should be further explored. The natural occurance of interaction between those of different ages (e.g. in religious groups, institutions of higher education, civic and political organizations as well as in informal social setting) should be studied and may help us identify optimal conditions conducive to the initiation and maintenance of such relationships.
2) Age-segregated services should consider it likely that many of their own members or residents would also like to interact with people of different ages. Opportunities for promoting such interaction should be considered in the design and planning of these programs. Although

not examined in the present study, it is likely that conditions of physical proximity alone, in the absence of other common interests, will not result in meaningful social interaction.

3) Age-segregated services should be seen as an option appropriate for some older persons. However, majorities of elderly, even among those considered target groups for social services, will not be attracted to such programs. Increasingly, age-segregated services are being seen as major vehicles in linking older persons to a variety of other services and entitlements. There is a danger in the exclusive reliance on age-segregated services to identify the elderly in need and connect them with appropriate services. Multiple entry points into the service network should be encouraged.

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